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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the early examples of African American literature for children, this paper provides a glimpse into the historical development of children's literature that portrays African Americans and the people who had a definite effect on it. In contemporary time, numerous books are available that reflect the social and cultural traditions associated with growing up as an African American child in America. In the past, African Americans in literature were portrayed with negative illustrations, descriptions and language that reinforced damaging stereotypes. Throughout history, children were presented with these distorted images of African Americans in literature. These distorted images in literature in the past were linked to the social injustice of the time. As educators, we must be aware of how cultural groups were and are depicted in literature. By being informed about the past stereotypical attitudes about African Americans in children's literature, teachers can reexamine and select literature that reflect the current beliefs and values of African Americans. (Author/RS)

The Images of African Americans in Children's Literature of the Past

Regina Brown

ABSTRACT

In contemporary time, numerous books are available that reflect the social and cultural traditions associated with growing up as an African American child in America. In the past African Americans in literature were portrayed with negative illustrations, descriptions and language that reinforced damaging stereotypes. Throughout history, children were presented with these distorted images of African Americans in literature. These distorted images in literature in the past were linked to the social injustice of the time. As educators, we must be aware of how cultural groups were and are depicted in literature. By being informed about the past stereotypical attitudes about African Americans in children's literature, teachers can reexamine and select literature that reflect the current beliefs and values of African Americans.

Introduction

Early childhood is an ideal stage for children to begin learning about themselves and the world around them. Books are a gateway into ones heritage and play an important role in understanding and valuing ones culture. A positive self-concept is not possible unless we have respect for others as well as ourselves; literature can contribute considerably toward this understanding. Harris (1990) validates that children's literature is important because it shapes the child's perceptions of the world and their roles in it.

This article focuses on the early examples of African American literature for children. More specifically, it is intended to provide a glimpse into the historical development of children's literature that portrays African Americans and the people who had a definite effect on it.

HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Deane (1968) found that early literature depicted African Americans as being satisfied with his plight, unskilled unmotivated, and inferior. Dorothy May Broderick (Norton, 1983) analyzed literature published between 1827 and 1967. She reported that books portrayed blacks as unattractive, musical, superstitious, and dependent upon white people for whatever good things they hope to gain. "Broderick concluded that black readers would find little in them to enhance pride in their heritage; further, if these books were their only contact with blacks, whites would develop a sense of superiority" (p.490).

Early History (1800s – 1966)

1865-1913

In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment, outlawing slavery in the United States, is ratified. In 1868, The Fourteenth Amendment, validating citizenship rights for all persons born or naturalized in the United States, is ratified. The amendment also provides for equal protection under the law. In 1870, the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment secures voting rights for all male United States citizens. In 1875, Tennessee adopts the first "Jim Crow" segregation laws. During the Reconstruction Period Foster (1988) notes that African Americans learned the laws on paper were not the laws in the mentality of many. African Americans witnessed discrimination, segregation, an increase in lynching and the limiting of their education.

Both Harris (1990) and Richardson (1974) cite the work of Mrs. A.E. Johnson in the 1890s as possibly the first book written for African American children. *Clarence and Corinne; or, God's Way* (1889), her first novel and the first work by an African American portray poor working class characters. Clarence and Corinne work hard, do not

abandon their dreams and eventually triumph over their poverty. They achieve, "...respect, education, marriage, and middle-class status" (Harris, 1990, p.543). Mrs. Johnson chose not to portray African American experiences of the time. Therefore, Harris (1990) believes Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Little Brown Baby*, a collection of dialect poems published in 1895, to be a more appropriate candidate for the title of first African American children's book. Harris (1990) goes on to note, "for some...it harkens to the stereotype of the comic Negro. For others *Little Brown Baby* is a celebration of, or at least a homage to, African American folk culture and a subtle celebration of racial pride" (p.544). Harris (1990) mentions that some researchers dispute that *The Joy* (1880s), a monthly magazine by Mrs. Johnson, could be elected the first work created for African American children.

In 1896, the United States Supreme Court decides in Plessy v Ferguson that "separate but equal" public facilities do not violate the Constitution. The issue of illiteracy and restrictions on African American schooling (i.e. funding, curricula) made Dunbar's and Johnson's books limited in value (Harris, 1990)).

Deane (1968) discovered that a major kind of children's reading emerged in 1899. The literature, to be read by children themselves, was sparked with the appearance of The Rover Boys Series, The Bobbsey Twins, The Hardy Boys, and Tom Swift. These books were the dominant reading of children from grade two to grade six. They were inexpensive, available in neighborhood stores and commonly traded. Deane (1968) found that, "Until the 1950s...the Negro in children's fiction always spoke in dialect...the dialect seems an element of race...Negros were introduced as comic...its [dialect] use in these books was almost invariably degrading...and an indication of inferiority" (p.141).

African American characters tended not to be given names. Identification was implied by the work, dialect and the fact that the Caucasian characters are called "massa" (Deane, 1968, p.142). In the literature of the time, African Americans were portrayed as inferior socially and occupationally. Children exposed these series envisioned Blacks as servants and slaves, and always in inferior position such as porters, maids, cooks, handymen, butlers, mammies, ineffectual servants, ranch hands, laborers and cleaners, elevator operators and washroom attendants (Deane, 1968). Blacks were presented as lazy, ignorant, good natured, cowardly, subservient and terribly stupid. Degrading and derogatory words used to refer to African American children were quite common in these children literature series (Deane, 1968). Deane (1968) concluded the following:

> In general, then, the Negro, with one exception, is never presented in a children's series as bad, so of course, he can never really be good. Never is he allowed to develop as a real character, a real person; instead he is revealed always as a century-old cliché. (p.144)

During the early 1900s, an inundation of literature arose due to the emergence of several preconditions: an educated African American middle class; the emergence of an educated group interested in writing; African American publishers and changes in attitudes among White publishers (Harris, 1990). The opportunity for publishing included a number of black-edited/owned journals, newspapers and magazines. Many writers could write from firsthand experience because of their choice to be part of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP - founded in 1909) and other similar groups (Foster, 1988).

1913-1930

Foster (1988) notes that after 1910, a great distinction was made between "black work" and "white work." Although blacks migrated from the south to the north after the

Civil War (1861-1865), migration beginning in 1913 was immense due to the hope of employment opportunities (Foster, 1988). The Great Migration of 1915 (Valade and Kasinee, 1996) by southern blacks to the North was sparked by the demand for unskilled labor in northern industrial cities during WWI (1914-1918). Foster (1988) observes that between 1921-1924, migration by Blacks to the north was caused by the dissatisfaction of black soldiers and the loss of jobs to whites.

Harris (1990) found that many of the texts available during this period could be regarded as oppositional. Examples of this are texts by Mary White Ovington, a White radical who associated with the NAACP, *Hazel* (1913) and *Zeke* (1931). Though both texts present more realistic representation of African Americans, they also contain stereotypes. "Refinement, restraint, beauty, and moderation are embodied within the character most resembling Whites; and indolence, passion, lack of restraint, and physical plainness are embodied within the darker character" (Harris, 1990, p.545). In her books specifically for African American children, Ovington included candid discussions about lynching and detrimental racial attitudes were common (Harris, 1990).

Ovington's books were publicized in The Crisis, the NAACP's publication, and *The Brownies' Book*, a magazine geared to children published by W.E.B. DuBois in 1920 and 1921 (Harris, 1990; Richardson, 1974). Harris (1990) concludes that Ovington's attempt to provide African American children with positive self-esteem and authentic cultural images fall short; however, she represents an "emergent tradition" (p.546). The new tradition advanced from the efforts of DuBois.

DuBois formed the DuBois and Dill Publishing Company with Augustus G. Dill. They published *The Brownies' Book* and two biographies, Elizabeth Ross Haynes's

Unsung Heroes (1921) and Julia Henderson's *A Child's Story of Dunbar* (1921) (Harris, 1990). *The Brownies' Book* featured fiction, folktales, biographies, poetry, drama, and news pieces. Monthly columns were designed to inform, educate, politically inform and display the accomplishments of people of color. Haynes's 22 biographies introduced children to African Americans seldom portrayed in textbooks, such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Alexander Pushkin and Paul Cuffee (Harris, 1990). DuBois', his editors', and authors' s philosophy of African American children's literature representing pride, racial solidarity and authentic images was quite revolutionary during the 1920s (Harris, 1990). In addition, Richardson (1974) mentions *Negro Makers of History* (1927) by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, published through his Associated Publishers, as being a positive contribution to the literature.

The Great Depression began in 1929 and though The New Deal (Foster, 1988) suggested optimism for some people, blacks reaped few of the rewards. Foster (1988) notes that many blacks saw themselves as no better off and that almost everything in the South was segregated and unequal when progress was seemingly being made.

1930-1940

The Harlem Renaissance (1930s) was considered (Valade, 1996) a golden age of black literature and art in the United States. Dickson (1989) points out that an increasing amount of written work by and about blacks pointed to the need for control. Dr. Carter G. Woodson literacy efforts (Harris, 1990; Richardson, 1974) are a major contributor toward strengthening the future of African American children's literature. Woodson (Harris, 1990) instituted Negro Week, founded the Associated Publishers and the Association for

Study of Negro Life and History. Harris (1990) expresses Woodson's philosophy as follows:

> The education African Americans received in his day had not been devised for, nor did it serve to benefit of, African Americans. Rather, Woodson claimed, that education was suited mainly for the purpose of maintaining the lowly cast status of African Americans. (p.547)

Through the Associated Publishers, Woodson provided true representations of Black life during this time (Richardson, 1974). "This enterprise published a significant number of folklore, collections, biographies, poetry anthologies and histories explicitly designed to educate, entertain and emancipate" (Harris, 1990). A few positive contributions (Harris, 1990; Richardson, 1974) to the literature are: *African Myths* (1928), *Child's Story of the Negro* (1938), *My Happy Days, Picture Poetry Book* (1935) and publication of poetry anthologies by Helen Whiting.

1940-1954

Many things affected the advancement of Blacks in America. Discrimination and violence continued though the Supreme Court ruled (1944) that an American couldn't be denied the right to vote because of skin color. Segregation in the armed forces as the United States became involved in WWII, Jim Crow laws that would not allow blacks fair treatment, and double standards in the courtroom (Foster, 1988) demonstrated unfair treatment.

Arna Bontemps, the renowned Black author, helped thrust African American children's literature into the mainstream (Harris, 1990). Described as the contemporary "father" of African American children's literature (Harris, 1990), Bontemps' work represents the recognition of African American children's literature among White publishers and readers. *Golden Slippers* (1941), published by a major White publisher,

diverges from the conventional anthology format by not putting emphasis on didactic poetry. Richardson (1974) believes the poem "No Images" by Waring Cuney may have invoked feelings in the children of this era with the words, "She does not know her beauty she thinks her brown body has no glory..." (p.382). The anthology features poets such as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen and Paul Lawrence Dunbar (Harris, 1990; Richardson, 1974).

Bontemps wrote collective and individual biographies to provide literacy models for children to imitate ((Harris, 1990). *We Have Tomorrow* (1945), *The Story of George Washington Carver* (1954) and *Frederick Douglass: Slave, Fighter, Freeman* (1959) are a few biographies. He collaborated with Hughes and Jack Conroy to produce tall tales with White characters and he composed fiction. Harris (1990) recognizes the importance of Bontemps's work because:

> It represents the integration of African American children's literature into the mainstream as well as the shift from explicit racial themes to the more subtle use of race and emphasis on the authentic depiction of African Americans as they engage in typical activities such as attending picnics, hopping trains to the big city, and playing with friends. (p.549)

Richardson (1974) considers Shirley Graham to be the predecessor in the area of black biographies. She authored *Paul Robeson: Citizen of the World* (1946), *There Once Was a Slave: Frederick Douglass* (1947) and *Dr. George Washington Carver* (1944) to list a few.

In the mid-40s, the push for integration increased and changes in the status of African Americans occurred. There was a shift from explicit racial themes to more subtle racial undertones in literature (Harris, 1990). African Americans author such as Jessie Jackson (*Call Me Charlie*, 1945) and Lorenz Graham (*North Town*, 1965) published

works that dealt with the problem of race in the 1940s (Harris, 1990) (Richardson, 1975). *Call Me Charley* (1945) and others in this series present the hero as dependent upon the graciousness of white people to, "...see his way clear of the crisis, teaching his white antagonists in the process" (Richardson, 1974, p.385). In 1951, Elizabeth Yates won the Newbery Medal for *Amos Fortune, Free Man*, which characterizes the "noble slave" book. As with *The Cay* (1969 winner) and *Sounder* (1970 awardee), Richardson (1975) expresses how the committee lacked empathy toward the Black state of mind.

1954 - 1966

In Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954), the United States Supreme Court unanimously rule that racial segregation in public schools is unconstitutional. In 1955 Blacks begin a boycott of the bus system and in 1956, the United States Supreme Court outlaws segregated seating on buses. Congress passes the Voting Rights Act of 1957. The Act expands the role of the federal government in civil rights matters and establishes the United States Commission on Civil Rights to monitor the protection of black rights. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. The Civil Rights Act (1964) abolishes segregation in public accommodations throughout the South. The Act leads to the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

There was an upsurge in the number of Black writers being published during this time. There was increasing opposition to the use of certain illustrations and typecasts in literature depicting African Americans. The "social conscience literature" of the time attempted to promote "empathy, sympathy, and tolerance for Afro-American children and their problems" (Harris, 1990, p.549). Books during this time tended to conceal cultural

diversity and focus on assimilation and universal experiences. These "melting pot" books ignored differences except physical ones.

In 1954 Arna Bontemps published *The Story of George Washington Carver*; *Frederick Douglass* (1959) and *Lonesome Boy* (1955). The later is said to be one of the few creative books written up to this time. The main character, Bubba, does not heed the warnings of his grandfather. In 1956 Gwendolyn Brooks, a Black Pulitzer Prize winner, published her first children's book, *Bronzeville Boys and Girls*. In 1958, *South Town* by Black author, Lorenz Graham, shows a southern black family subjected to violence and the white citizens by their side. Some other authors during this time were Shirley Graham Du Bois, Langston Hughs, Charlemae Rollins and Jesse Jackson (Richardson, 1974).

During this time sport stories, biographies of famous men, slavery and Underground Railroad stories were seen as reasonably safe to publish. Richardson (1974) asserts that:

> No significant books about the school integration issue which as then racking the country appeared in the publishers' lists until after 1965...Even the civil rights movement of the early '60s did not immediately affect the offerings in this field. For the most part, this period contained the kind of literature common to previous periods. (pp. 388, 389)

Books that made the list were *Christmas Gif'* (1963) a collection of poems, stories and celebrations which relate to the way Black people celebrate that holiday, and *They Showed the Way* a collection of biographies of famous Black people by Black author Charlemae Rollins. Richardson (1974) perceives two critical issues that influenced the development of African American children's literature: (1) the uprisings of 1968 and (2)

the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. It wasn't until 1969 that the Supreme Court rules that school districts must end racial segregation at once.

Current History (1966 and beyond)

With the passage of ESEA of 1965, publishers such as Doubleday, Milton Meltzer, Macmillan, and Whitman Publishers equipped themselves to meet the challenge. Doubleday decided to do a black heritage series; Macmillan published *Snowy Day* and *Whistle for Willie* by Ezra Jack Keats. Both titles are proclaimed to be the first picture books published with a black child as the main character by a non-black author. Whitman Publishers made available the Mary Jo stories by Janice Udry. "They are simple picture books, depicting a nice middle-class black child in non-controversial situations" (Richardson, 1974, p. 390).

Some creative and positive literature for young children during this period is *Sunflowers for Tina* by Anne M. Baldwin (1970) which shows the relationship of a young child and her grandmother; *Sam* by Ann H. Scott (1967) – about a little boy who seems to young for everything and *Evan's Corner* by Elizabeth Hill (1967), a story that emphasizes the importance to sharing (Richardson, 1974). Along with positive books, literature that continued to depict negative images continued. Richardson (1974) notes books such as *Nitty Gritty* (1968) by Frank Bonham, *Whose Town* (1969) by Lorenz Graham, and *It's Wings That Make Birds Fly* by Sandra Werner (1968) encouraged children to see themselves and their community in a negative way. They provided no sense of hope. During the 1970s, of the 2,000 to 3,000 children's books published annually, about one percent involves Blacks. A child had one out of 100 chances to read a book with Black characters. That fact that many books represented stereotypes this

lowered the chances of a child reading books that would develop positive attitudes about themselves (Norton, 1983).

Harris (1990) states that the 1970s and beyond is a time of "culturally conscious literature – they are books that reflect, with varying degrees of success, the social and cultural traditions associated with growing up Black in the United States" (p. 550). *Sidewalk Story* (winner of the 1970 Council on Interracial Books for Children Award) by Sharon Bell Mathis portrays a realistic situation of a little girl trying to help her friend's family. *How Many Miles to Babylon* (an American Library Association Notable Book, 1967) by Paula Fox, *Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (Council on Interracial Books for Children Award, 1968) by Kristin Hunter, and *Na-ni* by Alexis Deveaux are a few titles that present constructive literature (Richardson, 1974). These works offered a range of the African American experience.

Biographies now included the story of *Nat Turner* by Coward-McCann in 1972, *Malcolm X* (1970) by Arnold Adoff, *His day is Marching On: A Memoir of W. E. B. Du Bois* (1971) by Shirley Graham Du Bois, *Fannie Lou Hamer* by June Jordan, and *Rosa Parks* by Eloise Greenfield (1974) to name a few. The anthologies also differ from those previously written. *Young and Black in America* (1970) by Rae Pace Alexander, *I am the Darker Brother*, edited by Arnold Adoff in 1968 and *Tales and stories for Black Folks* (1971) are a few mentioned (Richardson, 1974).

Julius Lester is given special mention as a black writer who has contributed greatly to the subject of children's literature. His first book *Our Folktales* was reissued under the title *Black Folktales* in 1970. Lester published a series of fictionalized stories beginning in 1972 with *The Knee-High Man and Other Tales*. John Steptoe, a black

author/illustrator, is considered one of the first to write in "Black English" as beautifully done in *Stevie* (1969). *All Us Come Cross the Water* by Lucille Clifton and illustrated by John Steptoe is said to be one of the best picture books. Virginia Hamilton, whose books have been honored by A.L.A. Notable Awards, has made a great contribution to African American children's literature as well. With *Zeely* (1968), *House of Dies Drear* (1968), *Time-Ago Tales of Jahdu* (1969) and *More Time-Ago Tales of Jahdu* (1972) and *Planet of Junior Brown* (1971), she has provided positive characters and storylines (Richardson, 1974).

Several authors who have shaped and are continuing to influence this period include Tom Feelings, Jean Carey Bond, Leslie Lacey, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Eloise Greenfield, Rosa Guy, Virginia Hamilton, Walter Dean Myers, Mildred Taylor, Nikki Giovanni, Alice Childress and Brenda Wilkinson. Newer writers include Angela Johnson, Patricia McKissack, Emily Moore, Joyce Carol Thomas and Camille Yarbrough (Harris, 1990).

Conclusion

Literature should enable a child to feel a sense of value and self-pride as well as help other children understand and appreciate another's culture. With this in mind, the early history of African American children's literature has failed. The history of African American children's literature has been tied to the current social bias and educational unfairness of the time. Few books portrayed African Americans respectfully. The illustrations, language and themes offered numerous stereotypes and derogatory images to children. Children deserve to read and see literature that appropriately reflects their culture. African Americans have been determined to remove negative portrayals of

African Americans in children's literature and to provide culturally and historically authentic images. Because of these pioneers, an increasing number of books are available that reflect the social and cultural traditions associated with growing up as an African American child in America. We can now share with children literature that reflect positive images of the African American experiences.

Educators should continue to work toward removing negative images of African Americans and other cultures in children's literature. As educators we need to reexamine traditional literature and select current literature that reflect true images, family values, and traditions of an ethnic and cultural group. We must support children in developing pride in their heritage, improving their self-concept and developing a sense of identity through unbiased literature.

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